

WHERE IS THE HILL CUMORAH?

Joseph Fielding Smith, *Doctrines of Salvation*, comp. Bruce R. McConkie, 3:232–243.

SPECULATION ABOUT BOOK OF MORMON GEOGRAPHY. Within recent years there has arisen among certain students of the *Book of Mormon* a theory to the effect that within the period covered by the *Book of Mormon*, the Nephites and Lamanites were confined almost entirely within the borders of the territory comprising Central America and the southern portion of Mexico—the isthmus of Tehautepec probably being the “narrow neck” of land spoken of in the *Book of Mormon* rather than the isthmus of Panama.¹

This theory is founded upon the assumption that it was impossible for the colony of Lehi’s to multiply and fill the hemisphere within the limits of 1,000 years, or from the coming of Lehi from Jerusalem to the time of the destruction of the Nephites at the Hill Cumorah. Moreover, they claim that the story in the *Book of Mormon* of the migrations, building of cities, and the wars and contentions, preclude the possibility of the people spreading over great distances such as we find within the borders of North and South America.

EARTH POPULATED RAPIDLY. If we are willing to accept the *Bible* record, which is confirmed by the *Doctrine and Covenants*, the entire civilization of the earth was destroyed in the flood except Noah and his family.² Moreover, this destruction took place less than 5,000 years ago, and today the population of the earth, notwithstanding wars and destructions, is estimated at over 2,000,000,000 souls.

The population of Europe, based upon the best records available, is vastly increased over that at the time of the discovery of America; yet upon this hemisphere are to be found hundreds of millions of people, descendants of European and Asiatic ancestors who knew nothing of this land before the discovery by Columbus. The rapid increase of posterity is known to every genealogist who has traced the record of the early settlers in this western country.

LOCALE OF CUMORAH, RAMAH, AND RIPLIANCUM. This modernistic theory of necessity, in order to be consistent, must place the waters of Ripliancum and the Hill Cumorah some place within the restricted territory of Central America, notwithstanding the teachings of the Church to the contrary for upwards of 100 years. Because of this theory some members of the Church have become confused and greatly disturbed in their faith in the *Book of Mormon*. It is for this reason that evidence is here presented to show that it is not only possible that these places could be located as the Church has held during the past century, but that in very deed *such is the case*.

It is known that the *Hill Cumorah* where the Nephites were destroyed is the hill where the Jaredites were also destroyed. This hill was known to the Jaredites as *Ramah*. It was approximately near to the waters of Ripliancum, which the Book of Ether says, “by interpretation, is large, or to exceed all.”³ Mormon adds: “And it came to pass that we did march forth to the land of Cumorah, and we did pitch our tents round about the hill Cumorah; and it was in a land of many waters, rivers, and fountains; and here we had hope to gain advantage over the Lamanites.”⁴

EARLY BRETHREN LOCATE CUMORAH IN WESTERN NEW YORK. It must be conceded that this description fits perfectly the land of Cumorah in New York, as it has been known since the visitation of Moroni to the Prophet Joseph Smith, for the hill is in the proximity of the Great Lakes and also in the land of many rivers and fountains. Moreover, *the Prophet Joseph Smith himself is on record, definitely declaring the present hill called Cumorah to be the exact hill spoken of in the Book of Mormon.*⁵

Further, the fact that all of his associates from the beginning down have spoken of it as the identical hill where Mormon and Moroni hid the records, must carry some weight. It is difficult for a reasonable person to believe that such men as Oliver Cowdery, Brigham Young, Parley P. Pratt, Orson Pratt, David Whitmer, and many others, could speak frequently of the spot where the Prophet Joseph Smith obtained the plates as the Hill Cumorah, and not be corrected by the Prophet, if that were not the fact. That they did speak of this hill in the days of the Prophet in this definite manner is an established record of history.

¹ Alma 50:34; 52:9; 63:5; Morm 2:29; 3:5.

² Gen 6; 7; 8; Moses 7:36–43; 51–52; 8:22–30; Alma 10:22; 3 Ne 22:9; Ether 6:7.

³ Ether 15:8–11.

⁴ Morm 6:4.

⁵ *History of the Church*, 1948 ed., vol. 2, pp. 79–80.

OLIVER COWDERY PLACES CUMORAH IN WESTERN NEW YORK. The first reference of this kind is found in the *Messenger and Advocate*, a paper published by the Church in 1834-5. In a brief history of the rise of the Church prepared by Oliver Cowdery, he makes reference to this particular spot in the following words:

“By turning to the 529th and 530th pages of the *Book of Mormon* you will read Mormon’s account of the *last great struggle as they were encamped round this hill Cumorah*.⁶ In this valley fell the remaining strength and pride of a once powerful people, the Nephites—once so highly favored of the Lord, but at that time in darkness, doomed to suffer extermination by the hand of their barbarous and uncivilized brethren. From the top of this hill, Mormon, with a few others, after the battle, gazed with horror upon the mangled remains of those who, the day before, were filled with anxiety, hope, or doubt. A few had fled to the south, who were hunted down by the victorious party, and all who would not deny the Savior and his religion, were put to death. Mormon himself, according to the record of his son Moroni, was also slain.

“But a long time previous to this national disaster it appears, from his own account, he foresaw approaching destruction. In fact, if he perused the records of his fathers, which were in his possession, he could have learned that such would be the case. Alma, who lived before the coming of the Messiah, prophesied this. He, however, by divine appointment, abridged from those records, in his own style and language, a short account of the more important and prominent items, from the days of Lehi to his own time, after which *he deposited*, as he says, on the 529th page,⁷ *all the records in this same hill, Cumorah*, and after gave his small record to his son Moroni, who, as appears from the same, finished, after witnessing the extinction of his people as a nation....

HILL RAMAH IN WESTERN NEW YORK. “This hill, by the Jaredites, was called *Ramah*; by it, or around it, pitched the famous army of Coriantumr their tents. Coriantumr was the last king of the Jaredites. The opposing army were to the west, and in this same valley and near by, from day to day, did that mighty race spill their blood, in wrath, contending, as it were brother against brother, and father against son. In this same spot, in full view from the top of this same hill, one may gaze with astonishment upon the ground which was *twice* covered with the dead and dying of our fellowmen....

“In this vale lie commingled, in one mass of ruin, the ashes of thousands, and in this vale was destined to consume the fair forms and vigorous systems of tens of thousands of the human race—blood mixed with blood, flesh with flesh, bones with bones, and dust with dust.”⁸

PROPHET APPROVES OLIVER COWDERY’S VIEWS. The quibbler might say that this statement from Oliver Cowdery is merely the opinion of Oliver Cowdery and not the expression of the Prophet Joseph Smith. It should be remembered that these letters in which these statements are made were written at the Prophet’s request and under his *personal supervision*. Surely, under these circumstances, he would not have permitted an error of this kind to creep into the record without correction.

At the commencement of these historical letters is found the following: “That our narrative may be correct, and particularly the introduction, it is proper to inform our patrons, that our Brother J. Smith Jr., has offered to assist us. Indeed, there are many items connected with the fore part of this subject that render his labor indispensable. With his labor and with authentic documents now in our possession, we hope to render this a pleasing and agreeable narrative, well worth the examination and perusal of the saints.”⁹

Later, during the Nauvoo period of the Church, and *again under the direction of the Prophet Joseph Smith*, these same letters by Oliver Cowdery, were *published in the Times and Seasons*, without any thought of correction had this description of the Hill Cumorah been an error.¹⁰

TESTIMONY OF DAVID WHITMER TO HILL CUMORAH. Another testimony of interest is that of David Whitmer given to Elders Orson Pratt and Joseph F. Smith in September 1878, when they paid him a visit at his home in Richmond. To these brethren he said:

⁶6 Morm 5; 6.

⁷7 Morm 6:6.

⁸8 *Messenger and Advocate*, July 1835, pp. 158–159.

⁹9 *Messenger and Advocate*, Oct., 1834, p. 13.

¹⁰10 *Times and Seasons*, Apr. 15, 1841, vol. 2, p. 379.

“When I was returning to Fayette, with Joseph and Oliver, all of us riding in the wagon, Oliver and I on an old-fashioned wooden spring seat and Joseph behind us—while traveling along in a clear open space, a very pleasant, nice-looking old man suddenly appeared by the side of our wagon and saluted us with, ‘Good morning, it is very warm,’ at the same time wiping his face or forehead with his hand. We returned the salutation, and, by a sign from Joseph, I invited him to ride if he was going our way; but he said very pleasantly, ‘No, I am going to *Cumorah*.’ This name was something new to me; I did not know what *Cumorah* meant. We all gazed at him and at each other, and as I looked around inquiringly of Joseph, *the old man instantly disappeared*, so that I did not see him again.”

Joseph F. Smith asked: “Did you notice his appearance?”

David Whitmer: “I should think I did. He was, I should think, about five feet eight or nine inches tall and heavy set. . . . His hair and beard were white, like Brother Pratt’s, but his beard was not so heavy. I also remember that he had on his back a sort of knapsack with something in, shaped like a book.”¹¹

“GLAD TIDINGS FROM CUMORAH.” Who can read the words of Joseph Smith as recorded in section 128 of the *Doctrine and Covenants* and not feel that he had reference to the Hill *Cumorah* in western New York?

“And again, what do we hear? *Glad tidings from Cumorah!* Moroni, an angel from heaven, declaring the fulfilment of the prophets—the book to be revealed, A voice of the Lord in the wilderness of Fayette, Seneca county, declaring the three witnesses to bear record of the book!”¹²

While in this statement it is not positively declared that the Hill *Cumorah* is the place where the plates were obtained, yet the implication that such is the case is overwhelming. Moroni declaring from *Cumorah* the book to be revealed!

JOSEPH SMITH LOCATES CUMORAH IN WESTERN NEW YORK. Perhaps this matter could rest at this point, but the question of the territory now embraced within the United States having been in possession of Nephites and Lamanites before the death of Mormon, carries some weight in the determining of this matter. *In the light of revelation it is absurd for anyone to maintain that the Nephites and Lamanites did not possess this northern land.* While Zion’s camp was marching on the way to Jackson County, near the bank of the Illinois River they came to a mound containing the skeleton of a man. The history of this incident is as follows:

“The brethren procured a shovel and a hoe, and removing the earth to the depth of about one foot, discovered the skeleton of a man, almost entire, and between his ribs *the stone point of a Lamanitish arrow*, which evidently produced his death. Elder Burr Riggs retained the arrow. The contemplation of the scenery around us produced peculiar sensations in our bosoms; and subsequently *the visions of the past being opened to my understanding by the Spirit of the Almighty*, I discovered that the person whose skeleton was before us was a *white Lamanite*, a large, thickset man, and a man of God. His name was *Zelph*. He was a warrior and chieftain under the great prophet Onandagus, who was *known from the Hill Cumorah, or eastern sea to the Rocky Mountains*. The curse was taken from *Zelph*, or at least, in part—one of his thigh bones was broken by a stone flung from a sling, while in battle, years before his death. He was killed in battle by the arrow found among his ribs, *during the last great struggle of the Lamanites and Nephites.*”¹³

HEBER C. KIMBALL TELLS OF DEATH OF ZELPH. Elder Heber C. Kimball who was present recorded the following in his journal: “While on our way we felt anxious to know who the person was who had been killed by that arrow. It was made known to Joseph that he had been an officer who *fell in battle, in the last destruction among the Lamanites*, and his name was *Zelph*. This caused us to rejoice much, to think that God was so mindful of us as to show these things to his servant. Brother Joseph had inquired of the Lord, and it was made known in a vision.”¹⁴

ANCIENT CITY OF MANTI IN MISSOURI. The following is also taken from the history of the travels of the Kirtland Camp: “The camp passed through *Huntsville*, in *Randolph County*, which has been appointed as one of the stakes of Zion, and is the *ancient site of the City of Manti*, and pitched tents at Dark Creek, Salt Licks, seventeen miles. It was reported to the camp that one hundred and ten men had volunteered from *Randolph* and gone to Far West to settle

¹¹11 *Millennial Star*, vol. 40, p. 772.

¹²12 D&C 128:20.

¹³13 *History of the Church*, 1948 ed., vol. 2, pp. 79–80. Through error the part of this quotation naming the ‘H111 Cuniorah’ and specifying that Zeiph died In the *last* great struggle was omitted in editions prior to 1948. It was, however quoted correctly, as written by the Prophet and here given, In vol. 6 of the *Times and Seasons* of Jan. 1, 1846.

¹⁴14 *Times and Seasons*, vol. 6, p. 788.

difficulties.”¹⁵

The following account of the same event is taken from the daily journal of the Kirtland Camp, and was written by Samuel D. Tyler: “September 25, 1838. We passed through Huntsville, Co. seat of Randolph Co. Pop. 450, and three miles further we bought 32 bu. of corn off one of the brethren who resides in this place. There are several of the brethren round about here and *this is the ancient site of the City of Manti*, which is spoken of in the *Book of Mormon* and this is appointed one of the Stakes of Zion, and it is in Randolph County, Missouri, three miles west of the county seat.”¹⁶

NEPHITE AND JAREDITE WARS IN WESTERN NEW YORK. In the face of this evidence coming from the Prophet Joseph Smith, Oliver Cowdery, and David Whitmer, we cannot say that the Nephites and Lamanites did not possess the territory of the United States and that the Hill Cumorah is in Central America. Neither can we say that the great struggle which resulted in the destruction of the Nephites took place in Central America. If Zelph, a righteous man, was fighting under a great prophet-general in the *last battles* between the Nephites and Lamanites; if that great prophet-general was known from the Rocky Mountains to “the Hill Cumorah or eastern sea,” then some of those battles, and evidently *the final battles did take place within the borders of what is now the United States*.

There were no righteous prophets, save the Three Nephites, after the death of Moroni, and we learn that Zelph was *slain during one of these battles during the great last struggle between the Nephites and Lamanites and was buried near the Illinois River*.

In the *Book of Mormon* story the Lamanites were constantly crowding the Nephites back towards the north and east. If the battles in which Zelph took part were fought in the country traversed by the Zion’s Camp, then we have every reason to believe from what is written in the *Book of Mormon*, that the Nephites were forced farther and farther to the north and east until they found themselves in the land of Ripliancum, which both Ether and Mormon declare to us was the land of Ramah or Cumorah, a land of “many waters,” which “by interpretation, is large, or to exceed all.”¹⁷

This being true, *what would be more natural than that Moroni, like his father Mormon, would deposit the plates in the land where the battles came to an end and the Nephites were destroyed?* This Moroni says he did, and from all the evidence in the *Book of Mormon*, augmented by the testimony of the Prophet Joseph Smith, *these final battles took place in the territory known as the United States and in the neighborhood of the Great Lakes and hills of Western New York. And here Moroni found the resting place for the sacred instruments which had been committed to his care.*¹⁸

IMPRESSIONS AT CUMORAH

LORD LED PROPHET’S FAMILY TO CUMORAH-LAND. As I stood upon these sacred places I had peculiar feelings which I cannot describe. I always do have such feelings; I have visited the Hill Cumorah and the Sacred Grove on other occasions. As I stood at the Smith home, I thought of the early struggles of the family, and wondered what means the Lord might have used to get them to move from Vermont or New Hampshire, if they had not been forced from these states by poverty. Their poverty was not the result of indolence, as the wicked have proclaimed, but the poverty and reverses of Providence, sent to give experience and to lead the family to a better land where the Lord could perform his work through the youthful Seer, yet to be raised up.

When the Smith family arrived in Palmyra they immediately bargained for the purchase of 100 acres of land, This is known today as the *Joseph Smith Farm* and is in the possession of the Church. In that day the land was covered with a heavy growth of timber. This had to be removed before the land could be planted and crops raised to pay for the farm. As I stood upon this ground, I thought of the struggles this entailed. My grandfather, Hyrum Smith, and his older brother, Alvin, were called upon to do much of this laborious task. The younger brother, Joseph, was too young at that time to give much help, being only about 10 years of age. Nevertheless he was called to assist, and a few years later—at the time of the vision—was under the necessity of performing labor required of a man.

The house which stands upon the farm was built by these sons of Joseph Smith, Senior; but it is *not* the house, as many have been told, in which the Angel Moroni appeared to Joseph Smith. The older house has long since disappeared,

¹⁵15 *Millennial Star*, vol. 16, p. 296.

¹⁶16 *Journal of Samuel D. Tyler*, Sept. 25, 1838, filed in Church Historian’s Office.

¹⁷17 Ether 15:8–11.

¹⁸18 *Church News*, Sept. 10, 1938, pp.1, 6; reprinted, Feb. 27, 1954, pp. 2–3.

and stood several rods to the north of the present home. After the proclamation of the Angel's visit persecution raged, and the family were not permitted long to enjoy the land which had cost them so much to prepare, because of others, who, through wickedness, for a season reaped the fruits thereof.

CUMORAH ONCE SITE OF CARNAGE AND DESTRUCTION. As I stood upon the summit of the Hill Cumorah, in the midst of a vast multitude, only a few of whom belonged to the Church, I tried to picture the scenes of former days. *Here were assembled vast armies filled with bitterness and bent on destruction.* I thought of the great promises the Lord had made through his prophets concerning those who should possess this choice land, and how those promises were not fulfilled because the people violated his commandments. *Here a people perished because of their extreme wickedness.*

There must be something in the destiny of things that would cause a repetition of this terrible scene on the same spot many centuries later. I reflected and wondered if this unhappy time would ever come when another still mightier people would incur the wrath of God because of wickedness and likewise perish. If so, would this same spot witness their destruction? I thought of the prophets, Ether, Mormon, Moroni, and tried to realize the sadness of their feelings as they witnessed the mad onrushing of their peoples to annihilation.

IMPORTANCE OF CUMORAH UNKNOWN TO WORLD. We sang the song, prepared for this celebration,¹⁹ *Zion-land*, and I entered heartily, sincerely, into the spirit of the song:

*God bless our Zion-land,
Firm may she ever stand,
Through storm and night;
When the wild tempests rave,
Ruler of wind and wave,
Do Thou Thy Zion save
By thy great might!*

*For her our prayers shall rise
To God above the skies,
With Him we stand:
Thou who art ever nigh,
Guarding with watchful eye,
To Thee aloud we cry,
God save Thy land.*

Here it was that Moroni, commanded by the Lord, hid up the sacred records of his people. Here it was, 1,400 years later, that he, then a resurrected being, came to Joseph Smith and committed these same records to the young man's care. At the time of the Prophet's first visit to the hill, it was covered with trees; today (1923) it is stripped and bare, save for the grass which grows abundantly. This former scene of strife and bloodshed, where two nations perished, later the sacred repository of ancient records, today is the abode of peaceful cattle, reclining and chewing the cud. The many millions of inhabitants of the land, who, because they love darkness rather than light, will not believe, and although an angel has declared it unto them, they appear to have no more thought concerning the wonderful events that have taken place near and on the Hill Cumorah, than have these cattle.²⁰

¹⁹19 President Joseph Fielding Smith was attending the first general conference of the Eastern States Mission, convened at the Joseph Smith Farm near Palmyra, New York, on Sept. 21 to 23, 1923—the one hundredth anniversary of the appearance of Moroni to Joseph Smith.

²⁰20 *Rel. Soc. Mag.*, vol. 10, pp. 586–587.

Not Two Cumorahs

The Messenger, July 1960, No. 51.

Bishops

“Attention Called To ‘Book of Mormon’ Maps”

Our attention has been brought in the past few weeks to certain “Book of Mormon Lands” maps which are being offered to Church leaders and auxiliary workers by a California organization. They are apparently being distributed free of charge.

We wish to refer bishops to the printed matter at the bottom of the map, which contains an inference that there are two, rather than one, Hills Cumorah — one in Mexico as well as the one in New York.

The Church has never accepted this contention.

Bishops are requested to make cognizant of this discrepancy those in their wards who might be sending for these maps or using them for instructional purposes. This concept of two Cumorahs should not be taught as official Church doctrine.

Mark E. Petersen, “A Work of Conversion,” General Conference address, in *Messages of Inspiration* (SLC: Deseret Book Co., 1957), pp. 98-106.

I do not believe that we should give credence to the highly speculative theories about Book of Mormon geography.

I do not believe that there were two Hill Cumorahs, one in Central America and the other one up in New York, for the convenience of the Prophet Joseph Smith, so that the poor boy would not have to walk clear to Central America to get the gold plates.